

# Review Articles

*The Reference Function of the Library. Papers Presented before the Library Institute at the University of Chicago, June 29 to July 10, 1942.* Edited by Pierce Butler. . . . University of Chicago Press, 1943. 366p.

THE *Reference Function of the Library* is a collection of papers presented before the Library Institute of the University of Chicago in the summer of 1942. It gives a comprehensive picture of present-day practices in reference work in large, small, and medium-sized public libraries, school libraries, college libraries, and university and research libraries. Throughout, the emphasis has been placed upon actual methods used rather than upon constructive criticism of these procedures.

Miss Boyd's excellent paper on training for reference work does raise many questions as to present methods pursued in library schools. Here I should like to give a suggestion not contained in any of the papers. To me it seems that survey courses of at least the larger subject fields should be prerequisites for reference work. Present library school instruction in reference work is too selective, too dependent on such guides as Mudge, Minto, and Shores. While these guides all serve a purpose, it would seem that our preparation for reference work should be of a much broader character. Such survey courses should present for each subject covered, the classics of the subject, the outstanding contributors to advancement, the important periodicals, the outstanding reference books (not only recent but older works as well), and finally, the indexing and ab-

stracting journals covering that particular subject field. This would correlate the materials which reference librarians need most and would make of the prospective reference librarian, a general literature specialist.

Mr. Kuhlman, in his paper, has clearly stated that a reference librarian is expected to have knowledge of all subjects—at least, sufficient to find answers to questions, and then goes on to point out difficulties in expecting any one individual to be a master of all subjects. Such survey courses as herein proposed, however, might attain, in a general way, this end.

Many of the papers pertaining to reference work in certain types of libraries attempt to classify reference work: information or fact finding, search or research, and reader's advisory service. One paper expresses uncertainty as to whether reference work is search or research. It should be pointed out that the two chief functions of libraries are first, promoting good reading, and second, providing reference service. To establish the fact that reference work is search and not research, or vice versa, is in no way going to increase the importance or value of that service. The reference service can only become more efficient with more comprehensive reference tools, such as indexes, reference books, and subject catalogs to the book collections of the libraries themselves.

## *Catalog a Reference Tool*

The first step toward this end is to make the public catalog a real reference tool rather than a bibliographical curiosity. Mr. McCombs's comments on this point

deserve endorsement. It has been library practice, for some time, to make each card going into the public catalog a perfect bibliographical tool, omitting nothing. In this connection, I have often wondered why catalogers, to be consistent, have not actually included the number of illustrations, plates, figures, etc., in the collation. By such detail some uniformity in cataloging has been achieved, but the resulting product has certainly not constituted a real index to the book collection contained in the library. If all unnecessary details were eliminated from the author card, making it more of an index card than a complete bibliographical tool, funds now expended in laborious bibliographical work could be used for expanding and making more useful the comprehensive subject approach to the library's collections. Periodicals, serials, and public documents could be fitted into this scheme by broad subjects and some analytics. Most of the indexing which is done by the *Experiment Station Record*, the *Agricultural Index*, the *Public Document Catalogue*, and similar tools, does not necessarily need to be duplicated in the public catalog. Were this duplication eliminated, more time could be spent upon making comprehensive subject analyses of the book collections not elsewhere already adequately indexed.

A second step in the increasing of the efficiency of reference work is the producing of comprehensive guides to reference books, not selective like Mudge, but covering, in addition to current reference books, all important reference books of the past. This subject is discussed in the paper on "Book Selection for Reference Work" by Mr. Spargo.

### *Subject Bibliographies Needed*

Reference work would be greatly aided were more adequate and comprehensive subject bibliographies available. Here again complete coverage rather than selectivity is indicated. Mr. Spargo expresses this need by suggesting a subject index to printed books. Also, there is an ever-increasing need for detailed bibliographies of the works of standard authors. These suggested bibliographical ventures should be correlated with the public catalog rather than duplicated in it.

Finally, comprehensive periodical indexes covering large subject fields and including all periodicals published in those fields, as well as the publications of learned societies, academies, and most serial publications, would save endless labor for the reference staff and for scholars.

Could reference departments be provided with some or all of the above-mentioned tools, the staffs of those departments would be better able to cope with public demands and could spend most of their time in training patrons to find material themselves. The lack of these tools definitely places a heavy burden on reference service. How much simpler it would be if the reference librarian could say, "This catalog is a complete subject analysis of our book collection;" "This periodical index includes all periodicals in this subject field;" or "This comprehensive subject bibliography contains all material on this subject." Perhaps these objectives seem difficult to obtain, but some libraries have taken steps in this direction. The classed catalog of the John Crerar Library in Chicago, for example, is certainly the type of subject approach to the library's book collection of which I speak.

### *Administrative Problems*

The paper on administrative problems by Miss Barton discusses at some length centralized versus decentralized or subject departmentalized service. Summarizing, enlarging on, and adding to some of Miss Barton's statements, it would seem that centralized service in small and medium-sized public libraries, college libraries, school libraries, and special libraries should be maintained, whereas the large public libraries, university libraries, and reference libraries require subject departmentalized service. The budgets of smaller libraries are not adequate to maintain the personnel and books needed for an enlarged reference service. Here, also, reference work is largely localized and less complicated. In the large public libraries and university libraries a very diversified demand is made on the reference service. Literature specialists rather than subject specialists are much needed, however. Departmentalization should not be extreme—that is, social science rather than economics, pure science rather than physics, etc. If the larger libraries would centralize reference service as a whole to the same location—that is, all on the same floor of the building; and if all patrons were first directed to a general reference room where the simpler fact-finding questions might be quickly disposed of and from there directed to the social science reference room, the pure science reference room, the applied science reference room, the humanities reference room, etc., where questions or problems requiring search might have the assistance of literature specialists, better reference service would result. The addition of literature specialists could be entirely dependent on the locale of the library. If there are constant demands in the field of chemistry, add a chemistry

literature specialist; if history, a history literature specialist; etc. The larger library, with this type of organization, would certainly be able to supply all available data contained in its collection on any subject to its clientele promptly and efficiently.

In addition to the papers on reference work in various types of libraries and administrative problems, there is a group of papers on special reference problems in art and music, map collections, social science, science and technology, rare books, and supplementary reference materials. Mr. Angle's paper on reference work in the rare book room is brief, concise, and to the point. Mr. Kuhlman's paper on "Supplementary Reference Materials" shows clearly the complications involved in dealing with fugitive materials. A paper on public documents reference problems would have added materially to the collection.

*Reference Function of the Library* will bear careful reading, study, and discussion. The amazing thing is that, after over half a century of technical library training, many of the problems which faced librarians fifty years ago still remain unsolved.—*Jerome K. Wilcox, University of California Library, Berkeley.*

*The Chicago Public Library: Origins and Backgrounds.* Gwladys Spencer. University of Chicago Press, 1943.

This study of the Chicago Public Library confines itself largely to origins and backgrounds. Some, but relatively slight, attention is given to the organization period following legislative authorization and none to the library's development.

The cultural and economic background of the city of Chicago from its founding to the establishment of the Chicago Public